

One Man's Love for One Woman

The Story of an Indian Emperor,
His Queen, and the World's
Most Beautiful Building

By LEONE K. LOWDEN

WHEN age comes on, memory slips aside its mystic curtain and the mind reverts to the days of the long ago. Ah, yes, life is a cycle—child, man, and child again. Every man and every woman passes through the same experience; but few, if any, have ever had the romantic, tragic experience that came unto Shah Jehan, a Mogul emperor of India who caused to be erected a perfect memorial unto his beloved wife and who was then dethroned by an ambitious son and imprisoned in his own private mosque within the palace of Agra.

In 1666, as in other years, the little gilt-domed cupola overlooked the River Jumna. Every evening, when the moon and the stars looked down they saw a mile eastward the slender minarets and exquisitely molded form of the majestic Taj Mahal; then the palace, the walls, and the pearl mosque were lighted in silver of a heavenly hue.

In the absolute stillness of this oriental night of which I speak, the prisoner, with seventy-six years upon his back, stood at the window and looked upon the gleaming dome of the Taj Mahal where the "Light of his Life" lay entombed. He leaned against the casement as if he needed the support it afforded him; and the gentle Indian breeze caught his white garments and fluttered them gracefully against the wall. The lips of this old man, gray, feeble, and heartsick, moved as if in ceaseless prayer.

Into the room a woman noiselessly came. Half in fright she glanced at the unoccupied couch. Then she ran to the pathetic figure by the window.

"Father of mine," she whispered on taking his arm, "you should be sleeping. Let me help you to the couch. You are weak and trembling."

"Sleep is a waste of time," spake the aged emperor as he turned and testily straightened himself. "It is close and stuffy where the couch sits. I prefer to stay here so I can look out upon her marble home."

"But you must rest," the smooth and supple Jehanara protested. "Will you lie down if I move the couch beside the window?"

Her father, momentarily lost in reverie, did not answer. He seemed to have forgotten his daughter's presence, but she moved the couch and assisted him to be seated.

"It is beautiful, very beautiful," he murmured. "How white and pure it gleams! She was like that, Jehanara, so pure and so beautiful and so good, the most wonderful woman I ever beheld."

He asked his daughter to sit beside him and to hold his withered hands. She obeyed.

"You do not look like your mother," he went on. "You are more Indian like your grandmother, my mother who was a princess of Rajput and a daughter of the Rana of Marwar. But she, 'Light of my life,' was a full-blooded Persian, my beautiful Arjmand Banu."

Many, many times since his imprisonment had the once great Shah Jehan told this same story to his daughter, Jehanara, born at the time her mother died. But she listened anew as if she had never heard the words from his lips.

"You should be very proud of your race, Jehanara. The day will come when you will be remembered as the daughter of Shah Jehan, the Builder. Greatest of us all, however, was Akbar, the Ruler—my grandfather. His grandfather was the hero, Baber, the Founder. So I say, my daughter, be proud of your race."

"Years it has taken to make an empire here in the heart of India; but it will not live. It cannot! Already I see its decline, and my work is not done; it can never be done now."

The dethroned ruler closed his eyes in pain, physical pain of the body and pain in the remembrance of his hopes demolished by his own son, a child of the beloved wife resting in the elegant, marble-carved Taj Mahal. The greatest happiness had been his, and the worst bitterness alleviated only by his daughter's unflinching affection.

With her cool fingers Jehanara smoothed her father's brow. She was a maiden no longer. Filial love had crowned her life and imparted unto her a wisdom not gleaned in colleges nor universities. Hers had been years of sacrifice; for, dutiful daughter that she was, she had shared Shah Jehan's prison, forsaken society, and been her father's only comfort in his unhappy years.

"The court of my father," Shah Jehan continued brokenly, "was a disgrace to the name of Mohammed. He, I am sorry to say, was a profligate without character. The mighty empress ruled him hand and foot, as she did everybody. I hated her much and I would have

hated more but for one fact—she was the aunt of your mother, Jehanara. For that, I pensioned her and freed her; but she appeared no more in public after I ascended to the throne.

"And in those days when I was a warrior and a prince but not yet emperor, came Arjmand Banu, my beautiful Mumtaz-i-Mahal, of Persia. I called her Taj, my Gem, for she was gem among women. After she became my bride she shared my joys and my sorrows in a sympathetic way that no other woman ever could. Then there came a time when I was forced into a revolt against my own father. He died. They said I killed my older brother, but they slandered me. No, he was struck down, as many of our best have been struck down, by fever.

"After I took the throne she, who had lightened my burdens with her boundless love, could not stay with me long and share with me the honor of ruling the great Mogul empire. She, the mother of my children, died in the prime of her youth. She died, Jehanara, and left me you who never saw your mother. In my arms I held her. When the last dear breath had left her ivory body I vowed that to her would be built the grandest tomb that the mind of man could design. And, Jehanara, see—it has been done—behold the Taj Mahal, the gem of edifices just as she was the Gem of the World."

The old man raised himself dramatically upon one arm and, with the other, he feebly pointed out of the window toward the Taj, the most wonderful structure on earth. Sixty feet below them flowed the Jumna, sacred of waters. It also washed the sandstone base

of her marble tomb. And how softly beautiful were the star-set midnight sky and the wasted plain!

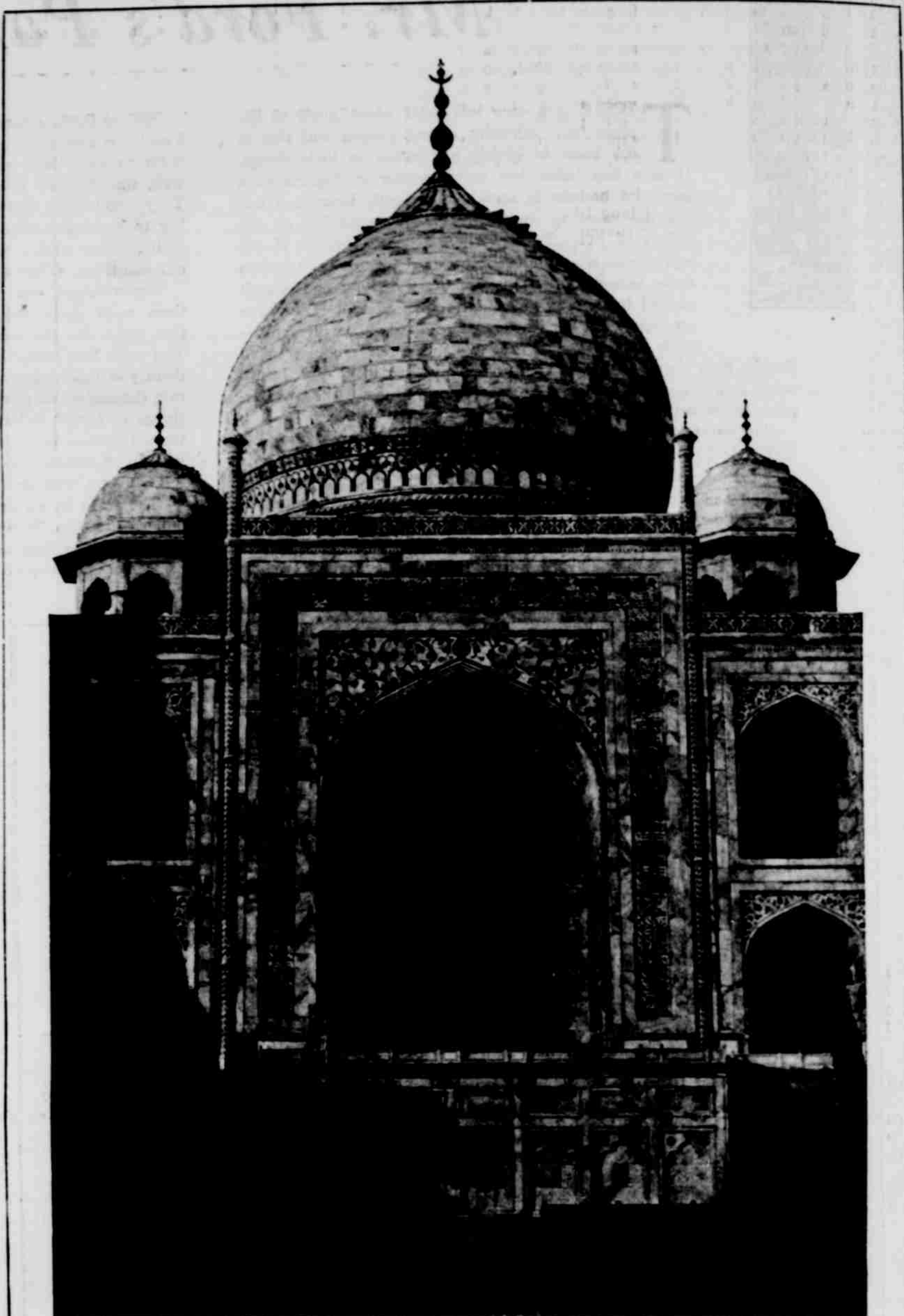
Jehanara looked and tears filled her sympathetic eyes, tears for the mother she had never known but who had been always the idol of her father's heart. Even yet was the "Light of his Life" guiding him from a world of travail into one unknown.

"She was not spared me so she could reside with me in the palace here," he mourned. "She never saw the pearl mosque or the new city of Delhi that I built from pure white marble in remembrance of her loveliness. Oh, that she could have seen the peacock throne that fate has taken from me. But the world will know; it will understand that for love's sake I builded. What matters my disgrace? She is not here to be humiliated by it. The great Allah has spared her that, though I shall die a dethroned king of kings."

"Father, don't!" pleaded Jehanara. "The world will remember you as the greatest of all emperors, a perfect ruler, beloved of all his subjects and blessed by them. It will remember you as a man who loved a woman as his own equal when women were everywhere possessed as mere chattel such as camels and elephants and dogs."

"Daughter of mine," he said, "it will remember you, too, you who have stayed by my side and refused a foremost place in your brother's royal palace. Ah, girl, you have remained with your down-and-out, your has-been father. Do you think the world will forget? It will honor you and erect for you a magnificent tomb—"

"No, no, father, that must not be. Too much of the hollowness of royalty have I beheld. No I do not



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